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In Search of Monsters to Destroy: American Empire in the New Millennium

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In Search of Monsters to Destroy: American Empire in the New Millennium

We have had an Imperial lesson; it may make us an Empire yet.

Rudyard Kipling

With the coldly calculated use of terror, the perpetrators of September 11, 2001 served abrupt notice of challenge to United States global dominance. The seemingly easy path before Americans that had appeared to stretch out well into the 21st century – promising boundless economic growth, a worldwide embrace of U.S. values, an absence of rivals – stood blocked by the rubble in New York and Washington. In tallying the costs buried within the debris of 9/11, Americans need to look beyond the lost lives and shattered dreams and recognize that defense of the empire they possess will not come cheaply. But first they must accept the fact of empire. Those who argue the U.S. has no empire to uphold whistle past the graveyard, ignoring the historically unparalleled confluence of political, economic, military, and information power that have come together in the American imperial construct. The U.S. holds sway over the world, an empire inviting admiration, envy, and, as with all empires before it, challenge.

John Quincy Adams warned in 1821 that Americans should resist the temptation of going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” But in September 2001, monsters literally came to the U.S., threatening political instability, economic malaise, and chaos. Even with al-Qaeda on the run and Baghdad fallen, the world remains dangerous and unstable, vital U.S. interests challenged by committed actors and insentient forces. North Korea pursues its nuclear ambition; Israelis and Palestinians remain locked in a death embrace; Islamic fundamentalists scheme to force the world back to the 7th century; Colombia teeters at the edge of failure; and the whole of the African continent stares at virtual extinction occasioned by a plague of Biblical proportion.

Only the U.S. has the capability to restore order, imposing its will when and where necessary. This imperial path holds danger and difficulty, but it is a choice the nation must embrace, even if reluctantly and at certain cost.

Taking up the Gauntlet

In September 2002, the Bush Administration released its carefully crafted National Security Strategy (NSS), affirmatively answering the question of whether the U.S. would meet the challenges posed by a disordered world, implicitly accepting the mantle and responsibility of empire. The Administration determined, not unreasonably, that the doctrines of containment and deterrence that had served the nation throughout the Cold War would not be effective in protecting Americans against asymmetric threats posed by irrational or ideologically motivated non-state actors or rogue states, actors who would be neither contained nor deterred.¹ The new “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emption, as enunciated in the NSS, drew attention (and criticism) as proof that the U.S. would act unilaterally - indeed, with imperial “arrogance” - in defense of its interests.

If truth be told, “pre-emption” is not so very radical a concept; at heart it is simply self-defense. Controversy lies, however, in the robust version of self-defense espoused in the NSS. Therein pre-emption has moved from the classic, internationally recognized “anticipatory self-defense” in the face of imminent danger to a flat assertion that the U.S. can even change regimes in order to obviate dangers not yet operational, as exemplified by the war against Iraq.²

But even “more ambitious than pre-emption is the sometimes overlooked assertion that the United States will remain powerful enough to keep potential adversaries from a military buildup that would surpass or equal the power of the United States.”³ Herein truly lies assertion of imperial prerogative: the U.S. will “have all the power and no one else shall have the capacity to

provide a balance...[it is a] declaration of absolute military supremacy throughout the globe.”⁴ Max Boot, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, observes that this “predominance doctrine” reflects the American preference to go it alone, unconstrained by allies.⁵ Many in the world - the French come to mind - view the combination of pre-emption and predominance as insidious, an imperial overreach that goes beyond a “war on terror” to establish the U.S. not only as the world’s constable but as final arbiter of state legitimacy.⁶

A Rose By Any Other Name

The NSS seeks to soften such opposition with repeated assertions that the U.S. acts only with the most benevolent of motives: to “create a balance of power that favors human freedom: conditions in which all nations and societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic freedom.”⁷ Such pieties are very likely neither convincing nor comforting to European or Chinese practitioners of *realpolitik* (nor to al-Qaeda, for that matter), given the NSS’s insistence that the American vision of democratic governance and economic policy is the *single* acceptable model. But they do serve to make empire palatable to a U.S. populace that has “tended to reject the idea that our own high-minded republic might be imperial (much less imperialist) ...[certain that Washington] did not seek to conquer territory nor, supposedly, to dominate other societies.”⁸

It is true that American dominion lacks many of the indicia of classic empire – the U.S. does not, for example, forcibly extract resources from colonies, impose its political values and institutions by force, or direct the foreign policies of client states.⁹ While the operation in Iraq lends pause to the claim that the U.S. will not impose its values, as a general proposition America exercises its authority indirectly, preferring “seduction to coercion” (albeit perfectly prepared to use force as necessary), always with the goal of maintaining supremacy. As Andrew

Bacevich notes, this preference “befits a nation founded on the conviction of its own uniqueness, [an] empire... like no other in history.”¹⁰ In sum, rigid academic classification should not deter “Americans [from] admitting the truth and facing up to their responsibilities as the undisputed masters of the world.”¹¹

A Terrible, Swift Sword

American mastery comes in several forms. U.S. economic might drives the world’s trade and markets and American political power can often shape the decisions of international bodies. In the 21st century American “soft power” surely influences the course of human events, creating an enticing culture driven by U.S. command of the information network. But that attractive velvet glove hides a mailed fist, the nexus of American power. The U.S. “has overwhelming superiority in military power, and uses that power to influence the internal behavior of other states, [acting as] an empire.”¹² Televised images of American tanks rolling through the streets of Baghdad evinced the “centrality of military power to present-day American policy...to convey disapproval, change attitudes and dictate behavior.”¹³ As one reviews current American military strategy and planning for the future, defense of empire, if not its expansion, seems a clear though unspoken objective.

A Ruling Capability

In the Cold War years, U.S. military planning was “threat-based,” focused mainly on the specter of Soviet-bloc tanks racing through the Fulda Gap. With the collapse of the Soviet threat – and the seeming absence of any real threat at all – the military moved towards a “capabilities-based” posture, a shift in focus consistent with the 2002 NSS.¹⁴ A “threat-based” force was reactive and defensive in nature; the U.S. awaited the thrust. In contrast, a “capabilities-based” force carries with it an implication of offensive capability if not intent; the U.S. focus is not on

any particular threat as it prepares for any and all contingencies by adopting an aggressive, forward-leaning posture.

In Joint Vision 2020, the U.S. military posits “Full Spectrum Dominance,” a doctrine that moves beyond fighting and winning conventional wars, past confronting weapons of mass destruction, to a particular attention to the “asymmetric threats – terrorists, criminals, religious crazies, two-bit strongmen with big ambitions, anarchy-minded hackers and unscrupulous scientists peddling weapons secrets to make a buck.”¹⁵ This “capabilities-based” force provides policy-makers with a suite of options to fight what Boot calls “the savage wars of peace ...necessary to enlarge the ‘empire of liberty.’”¹⁶

The Sun Never Sets...

U.S. ability to bend wills derives from several key elements, but perhaps the most important is the ubiquity of its presence worldwide, with “military bases, or base rights, in some 40 countries – giving it the same global muscle it would enjoy if it ruled those countries directly.”¹⁷ The U.S. footprint is innocuous (often treaty rights without a physical presence, except as needed) allowing for a light touch that minimizes local resentments. Next, the U.S. projects power and imperial influence through its Special Forces, including intelligence capabilities, a key tool of “transformation.” Since 9/11, the U.S. has quietly dispersed such forces worldwide, moving “deeply into the governments, intelligence agencies and security apparatus of many countries...[with] small numbers of U.S. forces ‘advising’ (i.e., commanding) native forces...in effect usurping sovereignty.”¹⁸

The use of proxies is a time-honored tradition of empire: Bacevich devotes an entire chapter of his book American Empire to comparing U.S. proxies fighting, *inter alia*, in Afghanistan to British employing Gurkhas during the time of the Raj. When Australian Prime

Minister John Howard asserted his own nation's right to strike pre-emptively (following the October 12, 2002 terror attacks in Bali) his alarmed Asian neighbors accused him of playing America's "deputy sheriff" in Southeast Asia.¹⁹

The Prince in the White House

A rapid response capability, intelligence/information dominance, proxies, and air and naval power are all evolving components of American imperial power projection. That said, "lesson one in the Roman handbook for imperial success would be a realization that it is not enough to have great military strength; the rest of the world must know that strength – and fear it."²⁰ The war on terror, as the administration has oft-noted, is being fought in the shadows, as it should be. But the war against Iraq has been front-page news for nearly all of 2003, dominating the world's consciousness, underscoring the reality of American suzerainty. The willingness on the part of the U.S. to use credible and massive force against Saddam Hussein, as the Washington Post speculated April 13, 2003, did more than topple a dictator: it served notice in Pyongyang, Tehran and Damascus that Washington will remove those who threaten U.S. interests.²¹ That action is truly an exercise of imperial power, a "demonstration that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity."²²

Shocked and Awed...by the Check

The image of Saddam's statue tumbling from its pedestal brings with it a visceral satisfaction; the American psyche, scarred by 9/11, anthrax attacks, color-coded security alerts, economic woes and a general sense of unease, restored to a confident, imperial swagger. Watch out, world! But the victory comes at a cost and the bill has yet to be paid. Boot noted in October 2002 that as "impressive as the American military dominance of the past decade has been, it was acquired, relatively speaking, on the cheap. America spends only about 3.5 percent of its GDP on defense, down from 4.4 percent as recently as 1993...but [now] there aren't enough troops to

carry out all our commitments, and the equipment they use is aging fast....next year's (2003) defense budget increase won't begin to cover this shortfall...If America is serious about remaining the Big Enchilada it will have to spend more on defense.”²³ The expense of bases abroad, of massive deployments, of “full spectrum dominance,” is going to fall on the American taxpayer, with an economy still in the doldrums.

In spending for imperial defense, the U.S. may shortchange domestic priorities for, as Michael Ignatieff observes, “what empires lavish abroad, they cannot spend on good republican government at home: on hospitals or roads or schools.”²⁴ To the defense bill add also the cost of homeland security and, of course, the as yet uncalculated costs of Iraqi reconstruction.

The Romans, Ottomans and British resolved this issue easily and brutally, through the imposition of imperial levies. The U.S. approach, bowing to both domestic and international sensibilities, is of necessity subtler, based on the principle of what Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad has characterized as “empire by invitation.”²⁵ A good example is the arrangement that the U.S. has with Singapore, which agreed to pay for the construction of a naval facility that could accommodate American carriers. Singaporeans have now both an economic and security stake in the empire (not to mention plausible deniability, as they can claim that the facilities are open to any nation even if the U.S. is the only likely occupant). While such direct subsidies are welcome, the costs of the imperial construct are in the last analysis defrayed on a grander scale, through globalization and a stable, open economic order that furthers, first and foremost, American prosperity. This is the aim U.S. power ultimately means to impose and protect.

Non, Nyet, Nein

In addition to the economic accounting, there is also an intangible levy, best summed up by President Bush's question in the aftermath of 9/11: “Why do they hate us so?” He answered the

question in a typically American manner that underscores the sense of exceptionalism that informs U.S. policy: “They hate our freedoms.” Perhaps. But a more honest answer might be that “they” hate U.S. power and a system that “no matter how benevolent the intentions...will generate some violence...[by] those left outside the expanding walls [of empire]....”²⁶ More to the point, the weak have always envied the strong; it is a natural human reaction.

If foreign envy were the only concern of U.S. policymakers, the wailings of the French, Russians or Germans would be as ephemeral whispers lost in the rising American chorus. But these “allied” fulminations represent only the least threatening manifestation of challenge to the American empire. There are potential great-power rivals. China is most often cited as the likeliest candidate. Several respected U.S. research institutions have concluded, however, that, “China [remains far] from the threshold of global military power...[and that] the formidable U.S. lead over China in military technology may well expand in the 21st century.”²⁷ Hobbled by a shrinking population and a bankrupt social infrastructure, Russia’s bleak demographics leave it weak into the foreseeable future. The European Union, wired into the information age and potentially militarily capable, could emerge as a peer competitor, assuming it achieves actual political integration. But EU nations share U.S. democratic values and a commitment to open trade and market systems. They grumble at U.S. dominance but are unlikely to truly undermine an order that has brought them prosperity as well.

Gulliver’s Travails

The absence of great power rivals provides little comfort, however. In their place, “a viper’s nest of perils...that run the gamut from terror and international organized crime to rogue states and genocidal violence fueled by ethnic hatred” challenges the established order.²⁸

Professor John Keegan recommends that, in response, “the great work of disarming tribes, sects,

warlords and criminals – a principal achievement of monarchs in the 17th century and empires in the 19th be revived today.²⁹ Combating forces that have typically nibbled at the edges of empire “[has heretofore] been trivialized as hovering somehow beneath the dignity of serious strategists and military planners.”³⁰ The physical scars of September 11 – as well as its lingering economic aftershocks – make clear that the U.S. can no longer afford the luxury of that conceit.

Still and all, militarily engaging the Lilliputians might be the easiest element of a complex problem. Even in their most terrible forms, transnational terrorism, rogue states, and international crime are dwarfed by American power. The counterstrikes the U.S. can expect from al-Qaeda, the narco –traffickers, and the disaffected will be as pinpricks in the flanks of empire. It is crucial that U.S. responses, while firm, be measured against other interests. The danger ultimately lays not so much in what others do but in what the U.S. does or does not.

Of This World And In It

Ironically, the U.S., the nation of immigrants, “remains a profoundly provincial, monolingual nation...not [much] interested in the rest of the world and certainly [not knowing] much about it.”³¹ Yet, as Bacevich argues, “America’s purpose is the creation of an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of order and enforcer of norms.”³² Can the U.S. restore order and lead a world in which it has little interest and knowledge?

It is a critical question because the nature and ultimate success or failure of the American empire depends on its answer. If Americans become a truly insular people, suspicious of the world and of its motives, the nation is likely to head down unsavory paths, to an empire bereft of the values that gives the U.S. a legitimate claim to leadership. In the end, it will become an

empire that will have drifted from its bedrock moorings and it will fail. The better road would have Americans undertake their responsibility to genuinely engage the world they purport to lead, building relationships that will not only facilitate the restoration of imperial order but also soften the resentments that breeds chaos. There is no guarantee that such an empire will succeed – history has no precedents – but in the effort Americans will have put behind them the rubble of 9/11, returning to the path upon which they were embarked, while remaining true to themselves.

NOTES

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- ¹ Michael Ignatieff, "The American Empire: The Burden," The New York Times Magazine, (5 January 2003), 4. http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/america_burden_ignatieff_nyt_010503.htm (22 March 2003).
- ² W. Michael Reisman, "Pre-emptive Force: When Can It Be Used?" Foreign Policy Association, 13 January 2003, transcript of panel discussion, 4.
- ³ Jay Tolson, "The New American Empire? Americans Have an Enduring Aversion to Planting the Flag on Foreign Soil. Is That Attitude Changing?" U.S. News and World Report 134, no.1, (13 January 2003): 37. Proquest, NDU Library (30 March 2003).
- ⁴ Robert N. Bellah, "The New American Empire," Commonweal 129, no. 18, (25 October 2002): 12. Proquest, NDU Library (30 March 2003).
- ⁵ Max Boot, "Doctrine of the 'Big Enchilada,'" The Washington Post, 14 October 2002, sec. A, 29.
- ⁶ Discussions between author and several French colonels on margins of April 7-10, 2003 meetings in Paris, as part of annual exchange between students of the National War College (NWC) and students of the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires (CHEM). NWC counterparts carefully adhered to national policy as set forth by French civilian authorities. Even given the expected fidelity to policy, however, the author was struck by the clear discomfort of French military vis-à-vis the "unilateral" nature of U.S. action in Iraq. While sympathetic to the specific goal of removing Saddam Hussein and acknowledging that U.S. "values" were consonant with those of the French, the notion that U.S. goals and values could be imposed was perceived as, in the last analysis, dangerous.
- ⁷ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, President George W. Bush's transmittal letter to the U.S. Congress (17 September 2002): 1.
- ⁸ Charles S. Maier, "An American Empire? The Problems of Frontiers and Peace in 21st Century World Politics," Harvard Magazine (November-December 2002): 28.
- ⁹ Discussions between author and Col. Richard Hooker, USA, April 7-10 in Paris, on margins of CHEM meetings. Col. Hooker, a fellow NWC student, firmly adheres to the view that "the word 'empire' has a defined meaning" and that it is intellectual sleight of hand to shoehorn U.S. actions into that definition. His view reflects that of many Americans. The point is clear, however, that whatever the name, the USG must deal with the view abroad – and the actions that spring from those perceptions – that America is an empire and has to act accordingly if it is going to protect its vital interests.
- ¹⁰ Andrew S. Bacevich, "New Rome, New Jerusalem," The Wilson Quarterly 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 50. Proquest, NDU Library (30 March 2003).
- ¹¹ Jonathan Freedland, "Hail Bush: A New Roman Empire," The Guardian, (22 September 2002): 1. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/09/19/1032054915705.html> (22 March 2003).
- ¹² Stephen Peter Rosen, "The Future of War and the American Military: Demography, Technology and the Politics of Modern Empire," Harvard Magazine 104, no. 5 (May-June 2002): 31. <http://www.harvard-magazine.com/online/050218.html> (22 March 2003).
- ¹³ Andrews S. Bacevich, "Policing Utopia: The Military Imperatives of Globalization," The National Interest (Summer 1999): 1. http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/ni/ni_99baa01.html (2 April 2003).
- ¹⁴ Quadrennial Defense Review Report (September 30, 2001): IV. <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>.

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- ¹⁵ Bacevich, The National Interest, 6.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Donnelly, "The Past as Prologue: An Imperial Manual," Foreign Affairs (July/August 2002): 2. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/2002701fareviewessay8529/thomas-donnelly/the-past-as-prologue.html> (2 April 2003)
- ¹⁷ Freedland, 2.
- ¹⁸ "The American Empire," STRATFOR, (2 April 2003): 4. <http://www.stratfor.biz/1Story.neo> (2 April 2003).
- ¹⁹ "Howard Defends Terror Stance," Reuters (12 December 2002). http://onenews.nzoom.com/onenews_detail/0,1227,152638-1-9,00.html (21 April 2003).
- ²⁰ Freedland, 2.
- ²¹ Glenn Kessler and Karen DeYoung, "Foreign Policy: After Iraq, U.S. Debates Next Steps," The Washington Post 13 April 2003, sec A.
- ²² Rosen, 4.
- ²³ Boot, 3.
- ²⁴ Ignatieff, 3.
- ²⁵ Robert S. Litwak, "The Imperial Republic After 9/11," The Wilson Quarterly 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 78. Proquest, NDU Library (30 March 2003).
- ²⁶ Maier, 31.
- ²⁷ Paul Mann, "U.S. Military Technology Forecast to Outpace China's for Decades," Aviation Week & Space Technology 152, no. 3 (17 January 2000): 432. Proquest, NDU Library (30 March 2003).
- ²⁸ Bacevich, The National Interest, 5.
- ²⁹ William Anthony Hay, "Challenges of Empire," Foreign Policy Research Institute: Watch on the West, A Newsletter of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West 3, no. 5 (May 2002): 1. <http://www.fpri.org/ww/0305.200205.hay.challengesofempire.html> (2 April 2003).
- ³⁰ Donnelly, 2.
- ³¹ Bellah, 3-4.
- ³² Andrew S. Bacevich. American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

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